Number 165 • Fourth Quarter 1964

MODERN TAXIDERMIST

ALL ADVERTISING FOR FIRST QUARTER 1965 MUST BE RECEIVED BY FEBRUARY 20, 1965.
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—-:-—

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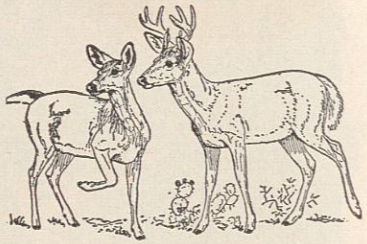

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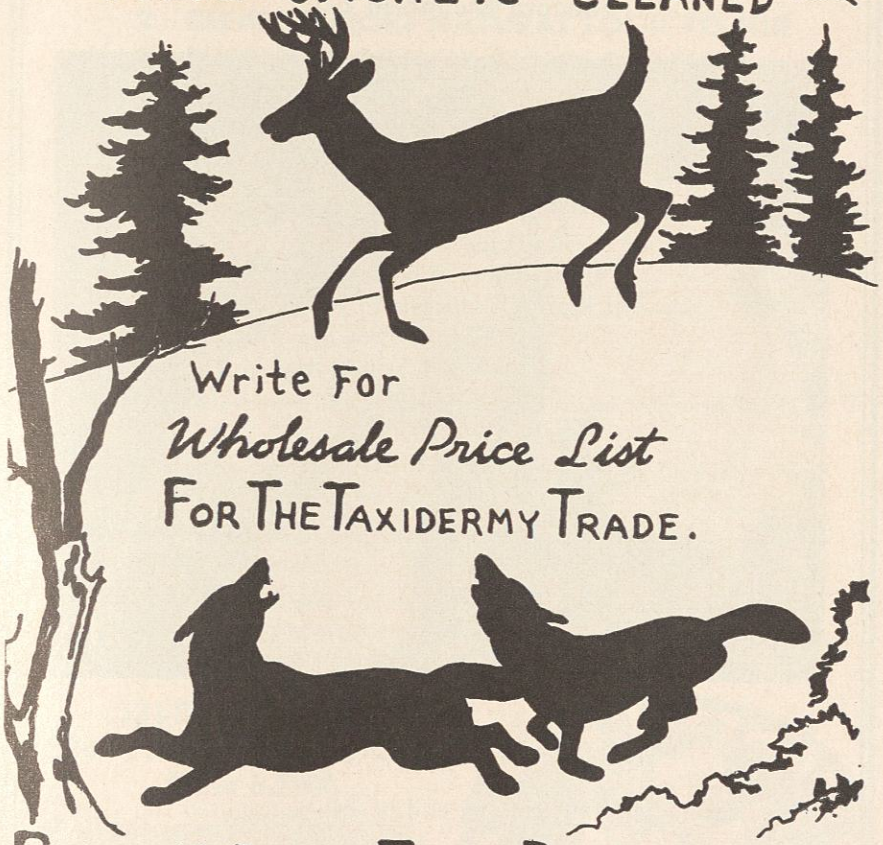

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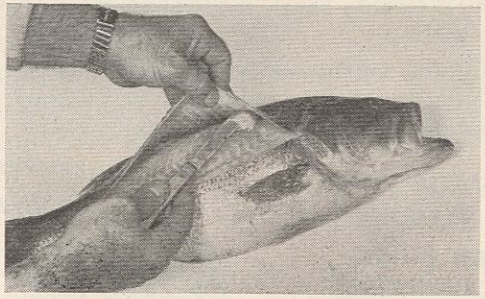

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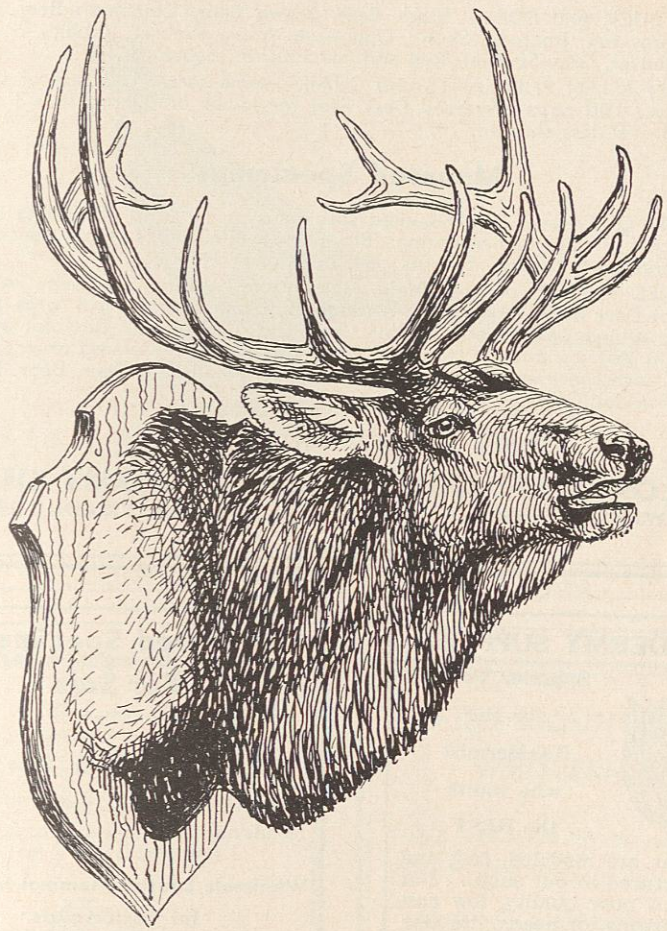

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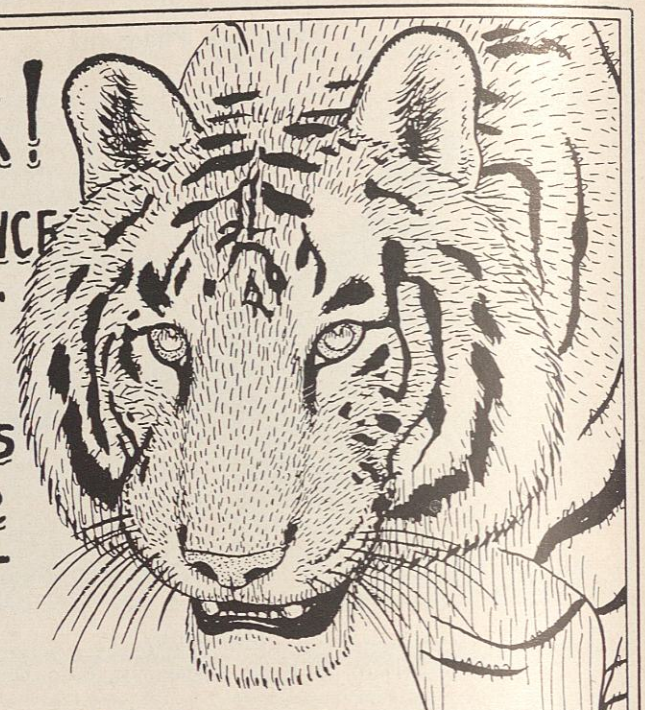

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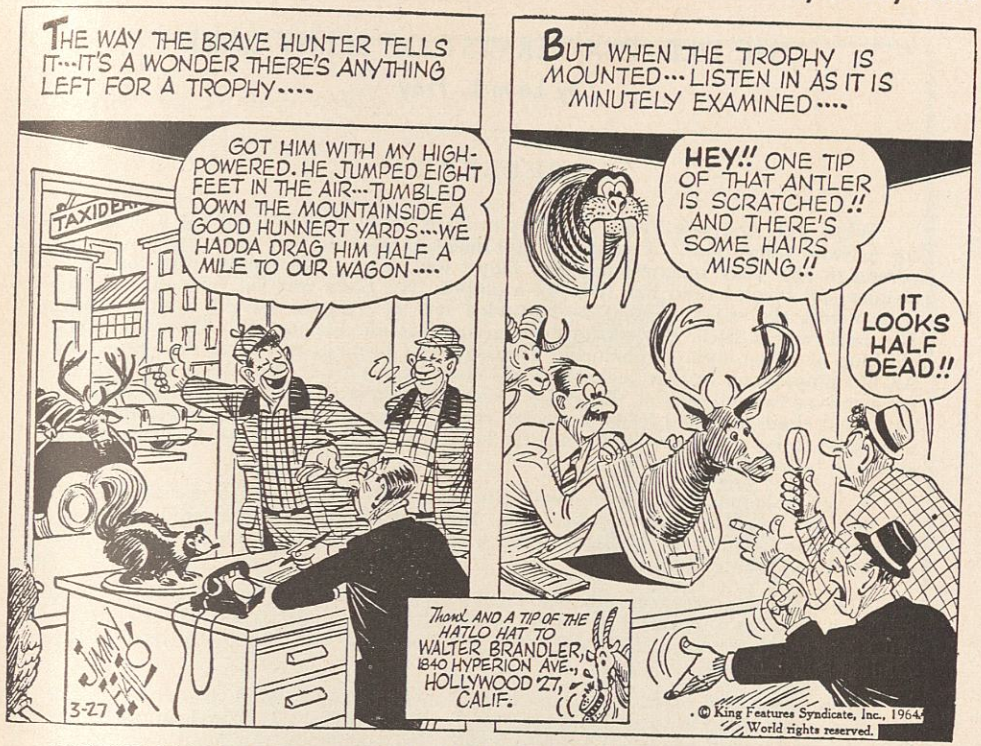
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TAXIDER
3-27
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MODERN TAXIDERMIST MAGAZINE

GREENFIELD CENTER, N. Y.

THE OLD TAXIDERMIST OF SPIRIT LAKE

By Leon L. Pray

PRELUDE

When you first saw Franz Hansel you were likely to think, "What a character for a Swiss fairy tale!" Five feet, eight inches tall, this old taxidermist was one person to stir your imagination. His figure was spare. His hands were long and slender and black-haired like those of a gibbon. His body was flat fore and aft, but wide across the chest, so that he reminded one of a figure carved from a plank. His back was a little curved forward, giving his an ancient air. He wore Swiss clothing of olden style; homemade moccasins and leggings of soft-tanned buckskin. An old moss-green leather jacket was his choice for a coat. His shirts had voluminous sleeves caught snug at the wrists. Across his chest hung a single Chamois horn on a gold chain attached by two jeweled rings. He never explained its meaning, but it seemed to be a treasured souvenir, for he always wore it wherever he went, whatever the task or occasion.

A veritable goblin's face reposed atop the odd assortment of garments. Yet no one ever laughed when they saw him. How old he was, nobody could guess and he never said. His large steel-gray eyes were those of a merry child, but his skin was leathery, seamed and hard.

Above the strange, carefully shaven features, a brush of short gray hair stood stiffly on end, like a bleached scrubbing brush, with thick black eyebrows for contrast. All of this odd personality fitted exactly and naturally into the rocky terrain that cradled Spirit Lake.

There are many Spirit Lakes in North America. I can safely leave the reader to guess which one I am writing about. Every State in the Union and almost every Province of Canada can boast a Spirit Lake. The name has a romantic sound. It smacks of deep mystery.

But only one Spirit Lake in all the world ever had a copy of Franz Hansel, and only he owned such a unique property.

The faculty of the State University knew him as a taxidermist of no mean ability. The State Fish and Game officials knew him as a crusader in a line of endeavor that was earnestly needed in our nation-wide food market; a departure they hoped would spread under his leadership and become as well accepted as the tuna trade.

His special public was a considerable spread of hungry people who liked what he did and who brought him a steady and growing income in return for his product.

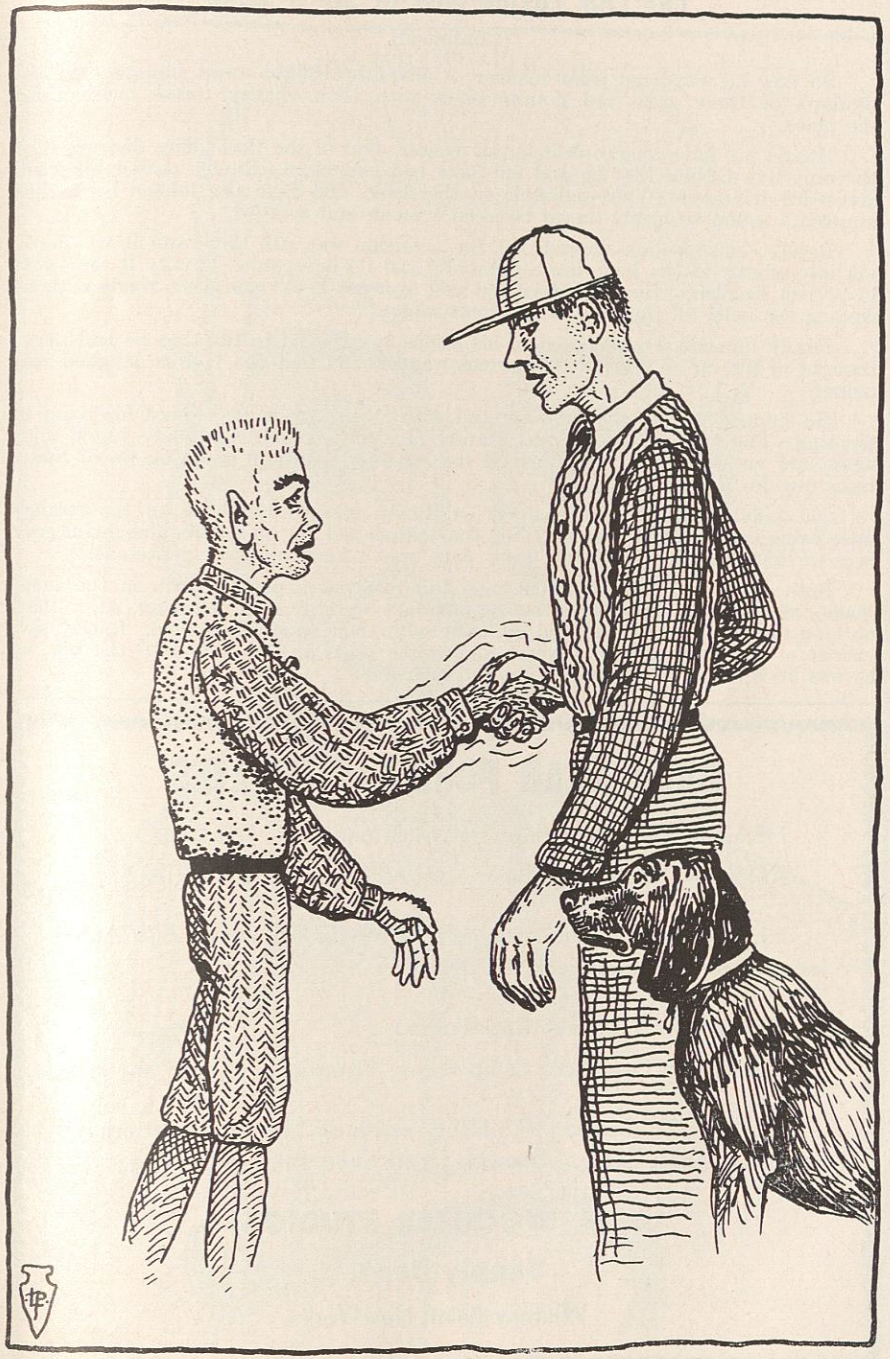
(The Old Taxidermist of Spirit Lake)

—— ACTION ——

One fall day Randy Murchison, curio dealer unique, and his coon hound Jake, in their long, ritzy bump-thumper of a car rolled into the one and only street of Spirit Lake and came to a stop in front of the Post Office. No such place as Spirit Lake had been thought of in the beginning of this trip. In fact, Randy seldom laid out any plan for any of his curio-hunting rambles. He just loaded up some provisions and a little gear and went drifting with the winds and Jake.

Somehow, in whatever town or hamlet where he stopped there was an odd little U.S. Post Office that attracted him like a magnet. This one in Spirit Lake village shared space in a typical little outland grocery store.

Randy sat pondering the fate or providence that regularly seemed to direct him into strange and bizarre situations.



The Old Taxidermist of Spirit Lake

(Continued)

So now he wondered what manner of adventure might await him here in the shadows of these great red granite crags with their shaggy forest overhanging the place.

He did not have long to wait for an answer. Out of the Post Office door strolled the only live Goblin that he and old Jake had ever seen. Randy passed his hand across his drive-weary eyes and stole another look. Old Jake also looked hard, then emitted a sound strangely mixed between a moan and a growl.

Randy's second look showed that the aparition was still there and it was looking interestedly at the long, low automobile and its occupants. Finally it remarked in perfect English: "How the devil did you ever get here over these roads without ripping the belly off that ridiculous circus wagon?"

Randy immediately came out of his trance and replied testily that he had never thought of his car as a "ridiculous circus wagon." At that the Goblin laughed real merrily.

He stepped out on the sidewalk and with a friendly smile offered his hand in greeting. The Goblin said, "Franz Hansel at your service. I already know your name and vocation from the notice on the car door. Is there anything we of Spirit Lake can do for you, sir?"

Old Jake watched apprehensively as Randy grasped the hand of the strange little being and shook it heartily; then the dog relaxed, for he saw the delightful gray eyes in that odd but fascinating face. Jake was a keen observer of details.

Both of the curiously different men had received a peculiar grip in the hand shake and Randy at once knew that he and Jake were in good company. After that, nothing must do but they should go home with their newfound friend. Randy saw visions of a Goblin cave somewhere among the crags as they slid into the car, so he was little prepared for what lay ahead in reality.

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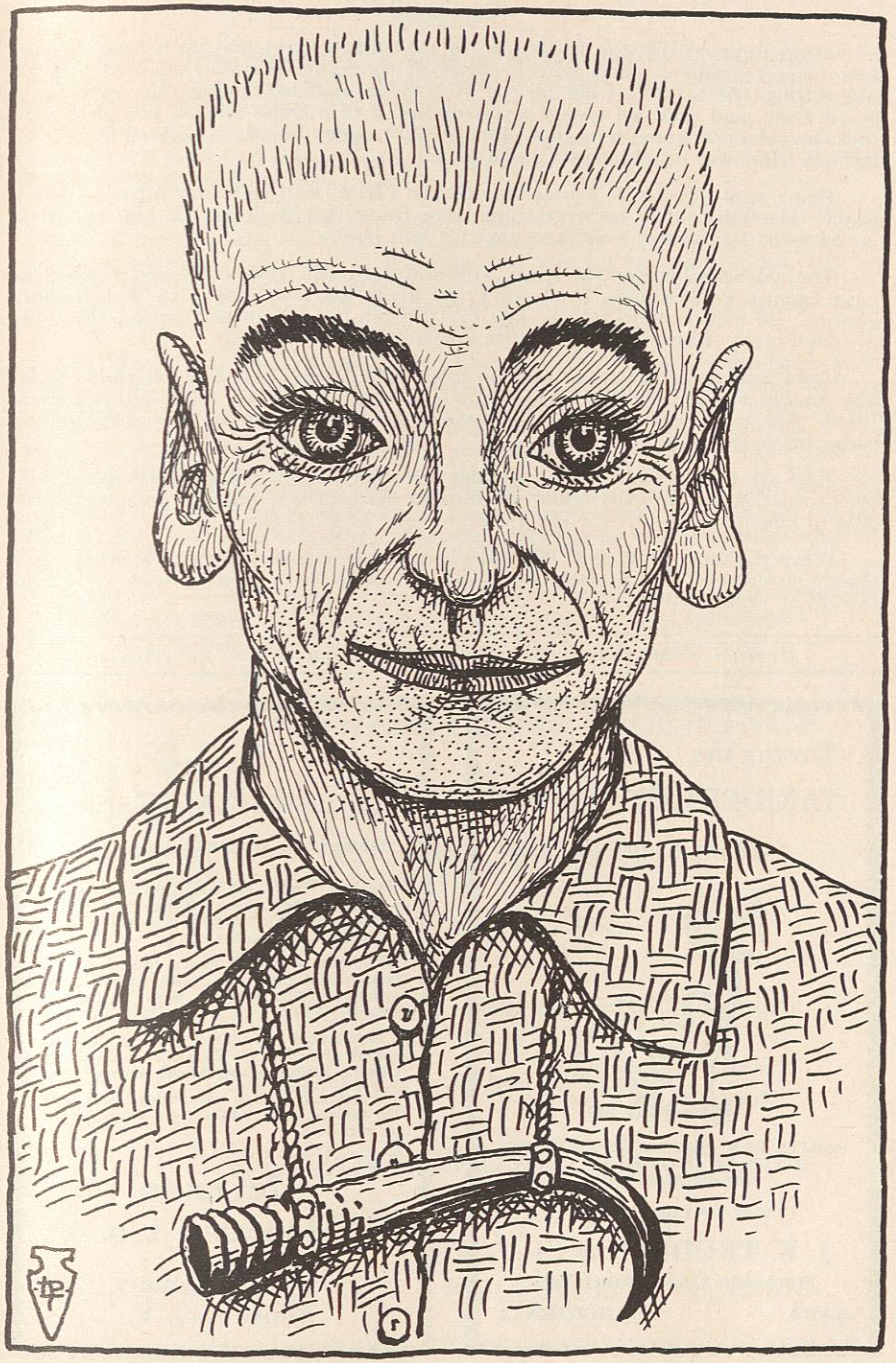

The Old Taxidermist of Spirit Lake

(Continued)

Franz directed the way to the end of the village street and up a long, curving lane of easy gradient which bore evidence of considerable traffic. Just as the sun was setting, the car rolled out on top of a rocky bluff overlooking the expanse of Spirit Lake, and drew up beside a perfect replica of a Swiss Chalet, complete with rocks and sempervirum on its roof. Randy drew a deep breath as they stepped from the car. Here was no visionary Goblin cave!

Franz went directly to a water tap by the Chalet wall and drew a basin of cool water, then made Jake his everlasting slave by setting it down for him to drink. No one but Randy had ever done that for him before.

The old hound lapped the water with grateful relish, then came and rubbed his head against Franz's knee. And old Franz knew just the answer to that friendly gesture. He gently drew a long silky ear through his fingers and patted the dog's wrinkled brow. Randy looked on with complete understanding.

Then into the Chalet they went to meet Mrs. Hansel and her one child, Suzie. The mother was as round as Franz was flat. The girl Suzie was unlike either parent. While they were both curiously fascinating, she was beautifully proportioned and endearing in every way.

Jake sat by the door while greetings were exchanged. Then Suzie asked him over to sit by the fireplace while she stroked his ears and talked nonsense by the mile to him.

When darkness crept over the scene and supper was served in true Swiss style, Randy noticed a slab of familiar golden-red meat on a platter with numerous cheeses at Franz's elbow.

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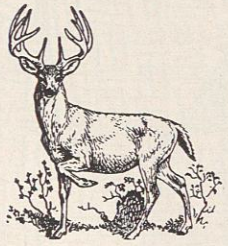

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The Old Taxidermist of Spirit Lake

(Continued)

He at once asked where smoked sturgeon was to be found in these days when sturgeons were so closely under conservation care that they almost had to be rationed to fishermen.

Franz winked and said: "Wait until you taste that 'sturgeon' and then we will talk about it." As the meal progressed, Randy kept looking at the delectable smoked fish, keenly anticipating a taste of it.

When Franz had tantalized him long enough, he cut some thin slices and passed them to Randy. Oh, that first taste! It was great! Then he slowly ate the rest of the slices, savoring every morsel. When he was through he said: "Franz, that is positively the best smoked sturgeon I ever ate! It has been many years since I could buy that item in the city delicatessens where it used to be commonly sold. Where did you get it? Would you favor me with the address?"

Mrs. Hansel and Suzie giggled and Franz looked at them and grinned. Then he said: "I produce that 'sturgeon' right here myself. It is the flesh of that terribly maligned common fish, the German Carp. I have a large retaining pond on the lower level of my property where I keep and feed great numbers of carp that I buy fresh from the river seiners only a short distance away. I have a sizable battery of scientifically run smokehouses on this lot and this smoked fish is my principal product. I am a hobby taxidermist in spare time, but that is only for play. Smoked carp built this Chalet and landscaped our grounds, and smoked carp accounts for the well-used lane that leads into here. Everyone who buys my product knows what he is getting and you can't keep the customers away."

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The Old Taxidermist of Spirit Lake

(Continued)

"Several old men who used to cherish smoked sturgeon and who have felt lost since the market for it is all but extinguished, heard of my smokery and came here in the hope of finding real smoked sturgeon. Well, I sat them down at a testing table in the little shelter by one of the smokehouses and let them try my product, without mentioning carp.

"One and all said it was the best smoked sturgeon they ever sampled. Then when I told them the fact about the meat, not one of them gagged at all, but laid their money down for a slab to take home. Several said: 'Why didn't I know about this before?' One and all said it was *better* than the real thing.

"The word has spread in such a way that my carp farm is paying better than any other kind of farm in this whole wide region.

"Nobody knocks carp around here any more. Everyone loves them!"

Then Franz lifted a bowl and handed it to Randy, saying: "Taste that." Randy spooned out what looked like a golden breakfast cereal onto his plate and tasted it, then took more.

Franz eyed him and saw delight spread over his face. Then he said: "That is a sideline that sells as well as the smoked carp. It is simply smoked carp eggs." Randy beamed and said: "Now I have been in gourmets' heaven! You can make me up a goodly package of both these products when I leave, and you can count me as a permanent customer from now on."

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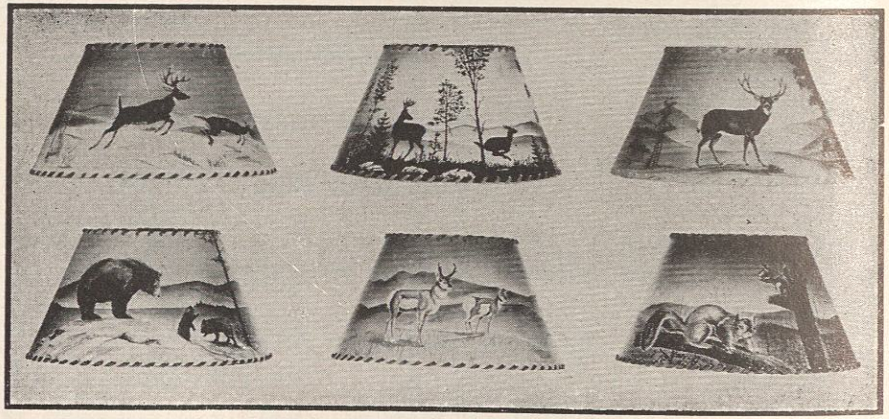

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The Old Taxidermist of Spirit Lake

(Continued)

Franz told him that the quality of any kind of fish product depended on the way the fresh caught fish is handled. A fish that is tortured on a stringer, where it usually dies and stagnates before being butchered, makes very poor fare. He said: "My carp are individually killed and butchered as soon as taken from the water. They are skinned, not scaled, through an incision along each side of the dorsal fin and extending to the head and caudal fin." He continued: "I would as soon eat a pig that died of suffocation as I would a fish."

* * * * *

After supper he led the way to his hobby workshop in the upper floor of the Chalet. Randy expected to see a layout of somewhat similar design as that of the Old Taxidermist of Frog Hollow, but his idea was not the reality.

Here in Franz's studio the tools and equipment were all but invisible. He remarked on this, so Franz explained: "All my life since youth I have practiced taxidermy as a hobby. I have always done other things to earn a livelihood. This has been so because I observed how those who made taxidermy their vocation appeared to be caught in a rat race, the like of which I did not like. I learned the art from an old man in Switzerland who taught me to look upon my hands as the greatest implements I could ever own. *He* had the simplest of equipment, but he knew how to get the most out of it. I have held to the ideals of his way. I have only a slightly more extensive outlay of tools and materials than my old instructor owned, and my work is done in great satisfaction. Most of the people who come here to buy my smoked carp do not know this part of my life. Some who might know if I chose to tell them, would pester me to do work for them."

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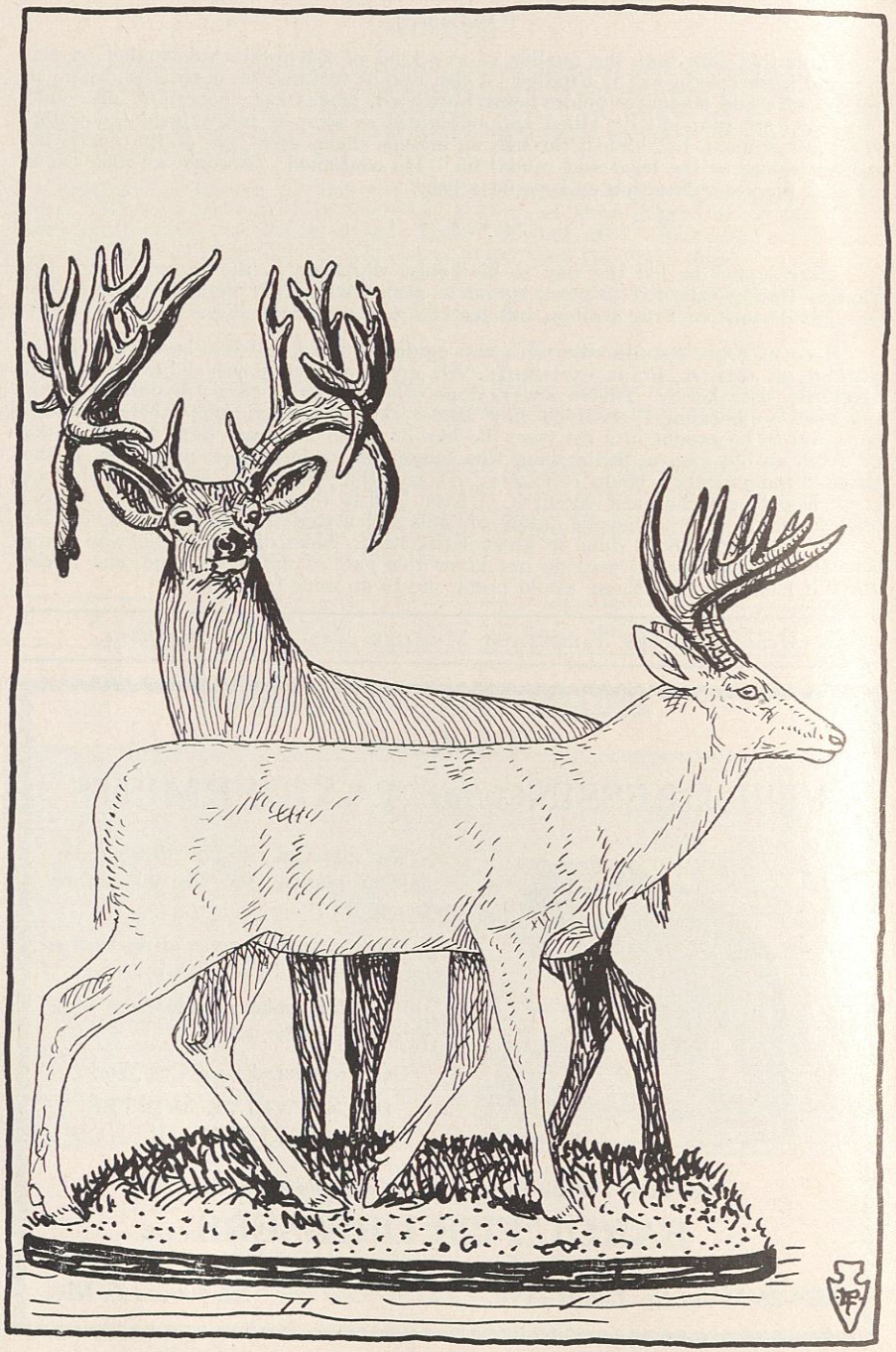

The Old Taxidermist of Spirit Lake

(Continued)

"I do not want to dull the keen edge of my love for this art by having to push a line of commercial output."

He showed Randy through the place, which was actually a small museum mostly filled around the walls with little habitat group cases of birds and small mammals with very good painted background scenes. There were also exhibits of reptiles and amphibians, the latter done in wax casts, accurately painted in life-like colors.

Randy was confronted at one end of the room by the lifesize, full figure mounts of a large albino whitetail buck and a still larger multiple-tined buck of characteristic normal color.

What a brace of deer! Franz said he called them "the monarchs of Spirit Lake," as they were both collected in the nearby forest.

There were several excellent game heads on the walls above the exhibit cases. Also a fine array of mounted fishes, all of which were overshadowed by the form of a sixty-five pound German Carp.

Franz now led the way to his work-bench, where Randy pondered, then asked: "Franz, what will become of all these delightful exhibits when you are done with them?"

Franz smiled and said: "That is all foreseen. These things I care so much for are going to the State University in event of my passing. Already, on certain days, some classes in biology are brought here for study purposes. I lecture some of the likely youngsters on the serious art of Taxidermy."

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The Old Taxidermist of Spirit Lake

(Continued)

"Most of my workers around the retaining pond, butcher shop and smokery are handicapped people. Two of these are taking to taxidermy with a very encouraging outlook for the future.

"They have built little workshops at home and they profit by my every word of instruction. Both were artistically inclined at the start, and I regard that as an essential to success."

When the family and Randy retired for the night, Franz remarked that tomorrow would be a specially busy day, but he would be able to show his carp business to Randy before he had to leave on a business mission.

Sleep that night was peaceful for Randy and Jake. Morning came all too soon, but it brought another surprise on the breakfast table.

There lay a platter of fresh carp filets, fried to a golden brown. As he ate, Randy recalled all the dumb, asinine quips to which he had listened, poked at the German Carp by prejudiced, bigoted people who knew nothing about the realities of the subject.

Why, this meat tasted like fried chicken! He related a line of standard knocks to Franz, who nodded vehemently and said: "Man, I know! There's guys who go out of their way to come here to berate and insult me on account of my business. It is all I can do sometimes to keep my shirt on! But I manage to still the desire to commit mayhem, and if I can get such people to sit down calmly and chew on a slice of my smoked carp, some of them change in that moment from a fire-eating fanatic into a smiling diplomat, reaching for another taste. Then I have another customer."

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The Old Taxidermist of Spirit Lake

(Continued)

"Owing to the rotten hooey that many people believe about carp, most of my best and staunchest customers are immigrants and colored people. And, believe *me, they know what's good!* The dudes are slow to catch on. They have listened to too many lies which they accept as fact. A lie flies fast and far. A fact has to crawl over the rough and difficult path to get home.

"But the tide brings in more hard-shell characters every day, and some time in the not too distant future the last wall of prejudice will fall and this wonderfully productive and delicious fish will be happily received everywhere."

Randy chewed on this logic, then said: "Franz, you are the right kind of person for this work. May you survive and flourish for many a year to come." With that they left the table.

Before they went out to see the works, Randy asked about the chances of his acquiring some curios to bolster his trade in the distant city.

Franz and the Mrs. went into action and laid out a lot of Injun relics and needlework that was not of the relic type. From the piles Randy selected many a good item, for which he paid cash on the spot.

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The Old Taxidermist of Spirit Lake

(Conclusion)

Then came the tour of the property, after which Franz shook hands and requested a repeat visit from Randy and Jake in the near future. Then he boarded his jeep and roared off down the long curving lane.

Randy watched him out of sight, then he sat on a flat rock to drink a glass of chocolate and eat a small cake proffered by Suzie Hansel.

As he thanked the ladies for their kind hospitality, he was already wondering if his city friends and cronies would be as loud and incredulous over this discovery as they had been about his tale of "The Old Taxidermist of Frog Hollow."

——(The End)——

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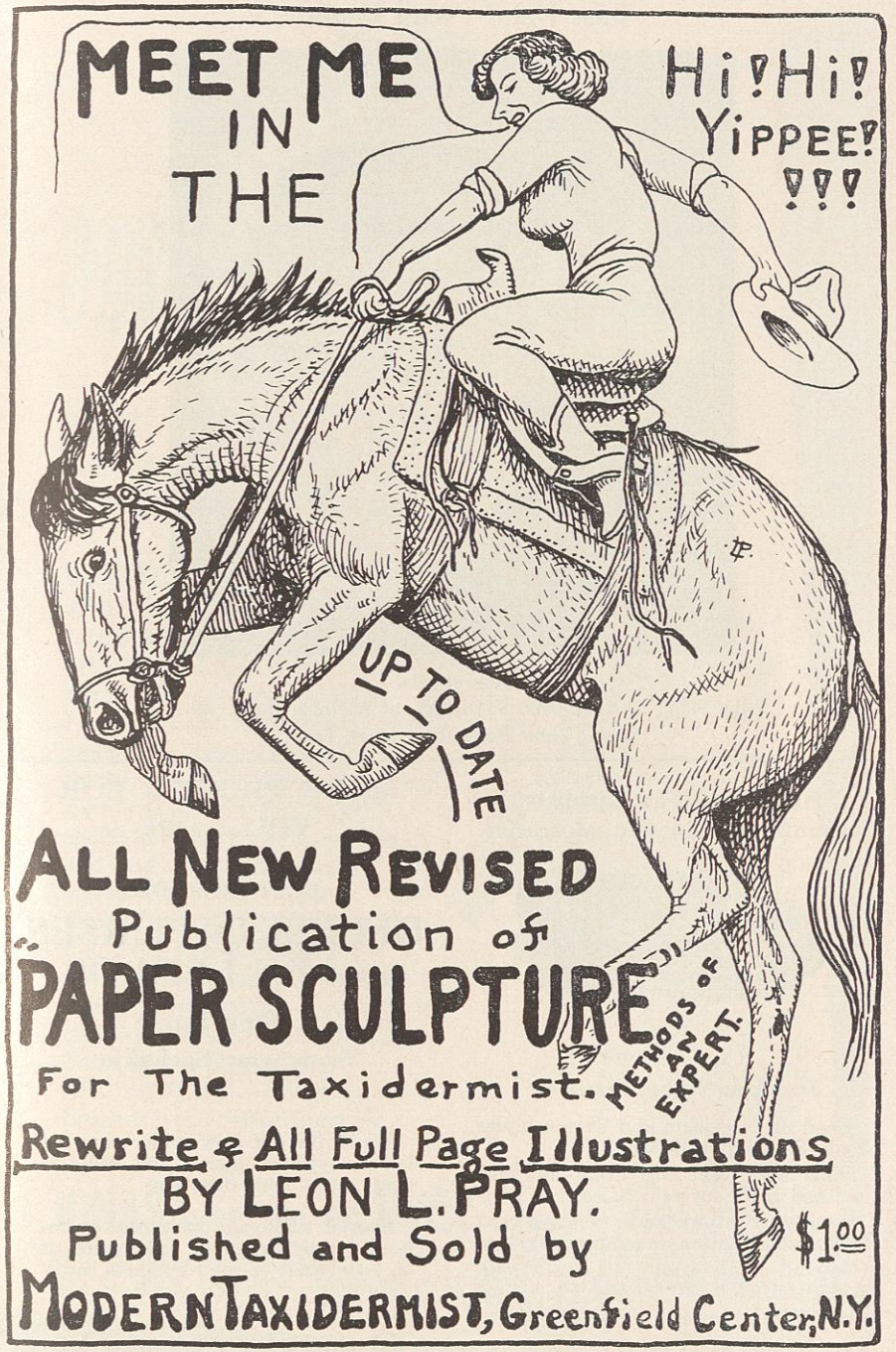

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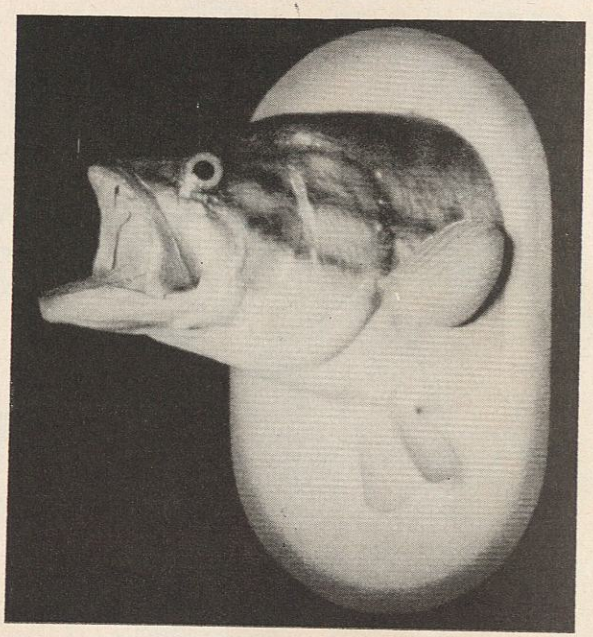

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